



Daniel Ellsberg

The value of dissent

Daniel Ellsberg was the ultimate government insider until he discovered that leaking information could be a patriotic act

A DIFFERENT war, a different time. But for those who still anguish over America's part in the Vietnamese conflict—and there are many—Daniel Ellsberg holds a position of some significance. His name may not ring an immediate bell for today's university students or political activists; but it was Mr Ellsberg, the ultimate defence intellectual and government consultant, who moved from helping plan and calibrate the war effort to revealing internal documents that laid bare the steady disappointments and deceptions of America's policy in South-East Asia.

The act that made him famous was his leak of a long Defence Department study scrutinising the war up to the late 1960s, soon known as the Pentagon Papers. In June 1971, the *New York Times* published the first instalments of what was to be a series based on this study, which he himself had helped write. The Nixon administration intervened to block further publication. But later that month, after an epic legal battle, the Supreme Court ruled that the *New York Times* was free to proceed. Mr Ellsberg was charged with spying and theft of government property, but the case against him fell apart in 1973 amid bizarre revelations of administration misconduct.

It has taken more than a quarter of a century for Mr Ellsberg, now a senior citizen of American protest, to deliver himself of his own story, and, somewhat surprisingly for a figure who is so self-obsessed,

Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers. By Daniel Ellsberg.
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he has written a book worth the wait. It is good to hear directly from him about his transformation, and his account is calm and convincing.

The most compelling sections of this memoir are not about the Pentagon Papers affair itself, but about Mr Ellsberg's years as part of the problem he ultimately set out to correct. It is chilling to read his description of the refusal of seemingly brilliant and otherwise admirable officials in the Johnson administration, of whom he was one, to express their dissenting views about Vietnam policy in writing or in meetings. Instead, they got along by going along and measured their success in terms of loyalty, not honesty.

Mr Ellsberg was especially good at this. Although he says he already had profound doubts about the war, he describes the exhilaration of working through an entire February night in 1965 compiling an inventory of alleged atrocities by Vietnamese communists that could be used to justify massive bombing missions in both the north and the south of the country. "That night's work was the worst thing I've ever done," he now believes.

But what was he to do? The tone was set by Robert McNamara, then the secre-

tary of defence, who is shown here in one chapter on a flight back from Saigon to Washington in October 1966 acknowledging to colleagues that in Vietnam "the underlying situation is really worse", only to claim on the tarmac at Andrews Air Force Base on arrival that "we're showing great progress in every dimension of our effort."

Ultimately, Mr Ellsberg concludes, President Johnson's "ability to escalate depended on secrecy and lying." And, despite all the claims to the contrary, he concludes, journalists were no match for the master politician and his lieges. "It became clear to me," Mr Ellsberg says, that they "had no idea, no clue, even the best of them, just how often and how egregiously they were lied to." Members of Congress, in his view, were equally helpless and hopeless, and could not be counted upon to ferret out the truth.

The courage of troublemakers

Thus it was that he came to believe that leaking could be a patriotic act, as he puts it, even at the risk of a long prison sentence. Mr Ellsberg describes first handing over secret memos to Neil Sheehan of the *New York Times*, to whom he later gave most of the Pentagon Papers. As if to test the system again, Mr Ellsberg discusses in this book a little-known Canadian intervention during the long Vietnam peace negotiations, details of which he assures us are still classified to this day.

"Secrets" will be of value to readers interested in recent history for the light it sheds on America's engagement in Vietnam. But it bears also on the present. It reminds us of the importance of dissent within democracies in time of war—a test that, with regard to Vietnam at least, America can claim to have passed, thanks in the end to its press, its courts and the courage of troublemakers like Mr Ellsberg. ■

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